

# Healthy Women/ Healthy Lifestyles:

What you need  
to know about alcohol  
and illicit drugs



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF  
HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES  
U.S. Public Health Service

**SAMHSA**

Center for Substance Abuse Prevention

**PreventionWORKS!**

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**E**veryone—whether young, middle-aged, or elderly; single, married, divorced, or living with someone; religious or not; living in the country, city, or suburbs; earning a lot or a little; from any ethnic or racial background; and living any type of lifestyle—is affected by alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs in our society.

Substance abuse kills over 500,000 Americans each year, making it the single largest preventable cause of death in the country, and costs the Nation an estimated \$313 billion annually, according to the *SAMHSA Statistical Source Book*.

Women are at especially high risk for the health and social problems caused by alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs. For example,

- Ⓒ Lung cancer rates among women increased over sixfold between 1950 and 1990.
- Ⓒ Women who abuse alcohol and/or drugs are at particular risk for sexual assault, unprotected sex, unwanted pregnancies, and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS.
- Ⓒ Multi-drug use—combining alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, hallucinogens, cocaine, heroin, inhalants, or nonmedical use of prescription drugs—is adding to the problems of many women who already are struggling to keep up the pace of their hectic lives.
- Ⓒ Grandmothers who should be enjoying their “golden years” are instead raising their grandchildren, taking over the responsibility from their own substance-abusing children.

Our Nation depends on its women leading strong and healthy substance abuse-free lives. The Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (CSAP) presents the following information on women and alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs as part of its ongoing effort to prevent substance abuse problems in our society. For a catalog of the variety of free information and services CSAP has to offer you, your family, and your community, contact CSAP's National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information at 1-800-729-6686, TDD 1-800-487-4889.

### **Alcohol: How much is moderate?**

According to the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans*, women who choose to drink should limit their consumption to no more than one drink per day. Men who choose to drink should limit their consumption to no more than two drinks per day. One drink means one 5-ounce glass of wine, one 12-ounce beer, or one 1-ounce shot of hard liquor.



The Center for Substance Abuse Prevention recommends that you **not** drink at all if:

- Ⓒ You're under age 21;
- Ⓒ You're pregnant, nursing, or trying to conceive;
- Ⓒ You're driving or engaging in activities that require attention, judgment, or skill;
- Ⓒ You're taking medication that interacts with alcohol;
- Ⓒ You're recovering from alcohol or illicit drug dependence;
- Ⓒ You drink to intoxication;
- Ⓒ You cannot drink moderately.

### **Alcohol affects women differently than men.**

Women become more intoxicated than men when drinking identical doses of alcohol. That's because women have less water in their bodies than men, so the alcohol is less diluted and has a greater impact.

Women do not metabolize alcohol as efficiently as men do, which may make women more vulnerable to the consequences of drinking.

Women are more likely to combine their alcohol dependence with drug abuse, particularly the abuse of prescription drugs.

Late-stage complications of alcoholism in women, such as liver damage, hypertension, anemia, and malnutrition, develop with shorter drinking histories at lower levels of alcohol intake than in men.

Menstrual disorders have been associated with chronic heavy drinking. These disorders can cause fertility problems.

### **Alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs can be harmful to pregnant women and their infants.**

Babies whose mothers drink during pregnancy, especially those who drink heavily, may be born with fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS).

FAS is one of the leading known causes of mental retardation. Babies born with FAS weigh less and are shorter than normal. They have smaller heads, malformed facial features, abnormal joints and limbs, and poor coordination. Difficulties with learning, attention, memory, and problem-solving are common. Some babies also have speech and hearing impairments and heart defects. Many of these problems persist into adulthood. Since there is no known safe level of alcohol, the best bet is to avoid drinking altogether if you are pregnant or thinking about getting pregnant.



Pregnant women who use drugs such as heroin, methadone, amphetamines, PCP, marijuana, or cocaine give birth to infants in double jeopardy. These drug-exposed infants may go through drug withdrawal or have other medical problems at birth.



Exposure to tobacco smoke poses grave risks to babies before and after they are born. The National Center for Health Statistics reports that babies born to smoking mothers face double the risk of low birthweight, which increases the likelihood of illness and death during infancy.

Infants are three times more likely to die from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome if their mothers smoked during and after pregnancy and twice as likely if their mothers stopped during pregnancy but started again after birth.

Children, especially those under age 2, are particularly vulnerable to secondhand smoke. According to an Environmental Protection Agency report, secondhand smoke causes 150,000 to 300,000 respiratory infections in infants that result in 7,500 to 15,000 hospitalizations a year. Other effects on children include increased prevalence of fluid in the middle ear, irritated upper respiratory tract, increased frequency and severity of symptoms in asthmatic children, and an increased risk of asthma for other children.

### **Substance abuse is related to child abuse and neglect.**

In one National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect study, children in alcohol-abusing families were 3.6 times more likely to be victims of maltreatment than children from homes without alcohol abuse. The National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse reports that 35 percent of 1,036,000 substantiated cases (in 11 States) involved substance abuse.

### **How can you prevent substance abuse-related child abuse and neglect?**

**Be attentive to your child's needs.** Physical neglect—not feeding, clothing, or caring for children properly—is more frequent than child maltreatment. Mothers who drink or use drugs are often not able to make responsible decisions regarding their children.

**Seek support and help.** No mother wants to injure her child. Parenting classes and support groups are available in many communities across the country. Stress reduction and relaxation exercises may help prevent abuse in the home.

**Recognize the effects of alcohol or illicit drugs.** Your use of alcohol or illicit drugs in response to stress tends to weaken your inhibitions and enhance your aggressive behavior, making it easier for you to abuse or neglect your child.

**Address the real problem.** Don't make your child the object of your misplaced anger. Confront your boss, spouse, or other family member when a disagreement arises.

**Break the cycle.** Children raised in abusive or alcoholic families often suffer from low self-esteem, intense fear, and extreme stress. Abused children are six times more likely than other children to repeat the pattern with their own kids. Break the cycle—find help and support for your child.

### **Binge drinking wastes young lives.**

Binge drinking is defined as "drinking five or more drinks in a row on at least one occasion." Binge drinking is the partying lifestyle of young people; in national surveys, about a third of high school seniors and 42 percent of college students reported at least one occasion of binge drinking within the previous 2 weeks.

Binge drinking increases the risk of alcohol-related injury. The four leading injury-related causes of death among young people 5-24 years of age are motor vehicle crashes, unintentional injuries, homicides, and suicides. Alcohol is involved in many of these deaths.

Alcohol and illicit drug use can impair a woman's ability to negotiate condom use, exposing her to the risk of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases and unplanned pregnancy.

### **Tobacco addiction starts early.**

The fastest growing segment of smokers in the United States is made up of females under age 23. Most smokers become addicted as teenagers; 80 to 90 percent of smokers start before age 20; over 70 percent by age 18. Those who don't start smoking before age 25 probably won't. Teens who become hooked will have as much trouble kicking the habit as any adult.

### **Alcohol and illicit drugs are linked to violence.**

Alcohol and illicit drug use is associated with up to 50 percent of spousal abuse cases, 49 percent of homicides, 38 percent of child abuse cases, and 52 percent of rapes. Alcohol, more than any illicit drug, has been linked with a high incidence of violence and aggression.

Partying with alcohol and illicit drugs poses potentially deadly consequences for young women in the era of AIDS. Getting high can lead to unplanned or unprotected sex and HIV infection, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases as well as date rape and other violence.

Streets, homes, and schools are all affected by alcohol and illicit drug-related violence. Early childhood injuries, abuse, or neglect; poor socialization experiences; lack of economic or educational opportunities; community disorganization; and physical reactions to certain drugs are all factors in alcohol and illicit drug-related violence.

When we think about alcohol and illicit drugs in relationship to violence, we usually think about the user who becomes violent. However, when both the violent person and the victim are using alcohol or illicit drugs, the situation is much more complex. Women who use alcohol and illicit drugs increase their chances of becoming a victim of violence.

### **Alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs cause health problems.**

Growing evidence links alcohol and breast cancer. A National Cancer Institute study showed that premenopausal women given the equivalent of two drinks a day had a shift in estrogen hormones. Breast tissue is acutely sensitive to estrogen; certain types of estrogen are known to stimulate growth of breast cancer cells.

Lung cancer has passed breast cancer as the leading fatal cancer for women. Reflecting a pattern of cigarette smoking, lung cancer deaths among women began rising in the 1960s, 25 years after the surge in smoking among women. Similarly, men's lung cancer death rates began to climb sharply in the 1930s, roughly 25 years after they took up smoking.

An Environmental Protection Agency report classified secondhand cigarette smoke (the smoke exhaled by smokers and smoke given off by burning cigarettes) as a carcinogen that poses as great a cancer risk as asbestos, arsenic, radon, or benzene. A report published by the *Journal of the American Medical Association* concluded that long-term exposure to secondhand smoke "increases the risk of lung cancer in women who have never personally used tobacco."

### **Alcohol and illicit drug problems occur among older women.**

Women's drinking habits may change as women grow older and face age-related losses: they retire, their children grow up and move away, a mate or a good friend dies. Some women drink more in response to such stresses.

As women age, their metabolism changes, making them more susceptible to the effects of alcohol. That means the drink they barely noticed at age 30 will pack the wallop of two or three drinks when they're 60.





Mixing alcohol with over-the-counter or prescription drugs is another problem for older women, and one that can be fatal. The potential for drug interactions increases when women are taking many different prescriptions or if they are having trouble taking the drugs correctly.

### **Substance abuse is higher among lesbian and bisexual women.**

Research has found that lesbian and bisexual women are at increased risk for alcohol and illicit drug problems.

If you are lesbian or bisexual, it is important that you understand this increased risk and protect yourself from the harms associated with alcohol and illicit drugs.

### **You might have a problem with alcohol or illicit drugs if . . .**

- Ⓒ No matter how many promises you make to yourself about cutting down, you frequently wind up under the influence of alcohol or illicit drugs.
- Ⓒ You're uncomfortable when alcohol or illicit drugs are not available. You have a few extra drinks before the evening begins that others don't know about.
- Ⓒ You regret things you've said or done when under the influence.
- Ⓒ You handle all social celebrations with alcohol or illicit drugs. You drink alcohol or use illicit drugs heavily after a confrontation or argument. When faced with a problem, your immediate reaction is to drink or use illicit drugs.
- Ⓒ Drinking or using illicit drugs changes your personality—from shy to outgoing, or vice versa.
- Ⓒ It takes more alcohol or illicit drugs than it used to to get the same effect.
- Ⓒ You remember how last night began, but not how it ended, so you're worried about your mental health.
- Ⓒ You switch drinks, jobs, relationships, and promises you make to yourself.
- Ⓒ You've missed work or school because of your substance-abusing behavior or you've been arrested for driving under the influence.
- Ⓒ You're angry or alarmed when others mention your substance-abusing behavior.
- Ⓒ Your hands shake in the morning.
- Ⓒ You feel alone, scared, miserable, and/or depressed.

Please see the next page for sources of help... it takes courage to ask for help, but you're worth it.

**Note:** This publication is an update of *Healthy Women/Healthy Lifestyles* (SMA 95-7094). While most of the information is the same as in the earlier version, much of the data have been updated.

*If you want more help...*

**More information and referral services are available from the following organizations:**

Adult Children of Alcoholics  
P.O. Box 3216  
Torrance, CA 90510  
310-534-1815

Alcoholics Anonymous  
World Service Office  
475 Riverside Drive  
New York, NY 10115  
212-870-3400 (publications)  
212-647-1680 (meeting referral)

Coalition on Alcohol and Drug  
Dependent Women and  
Their Children  
Washington Office of NCADD  
1511 K Street, NW  
Suite 926  
Washington, DC 20005  
202-737-8122

CSAP's National Resource Center for the  
Prevention of Alcohol, Tobacco, Illicit drug  
Abuse and Mental Illness in Women  
515 King Street  
Suite 420  
Alexandria, VA 22314  
703-836-8761

National Association of Perinatal  
Addiction Research Education  
(NAPARE)  
11 East Hubbard, Suite 200  
Chicago, IL 60611  
312-541-1272 (Publications)  
1-800-638-BABY (Phone Counseling)

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol  
and Drug Information  
P.O. Box 2345  
Rockville, MD 20847-2345  
301-468-2600  
1-800-729-6686  
TDD 1-800-487-4889

National Clearinghouse on Child  
Abuse and Neglect Information  
P.O. Box 1182  
Washington, DC 20013  
703-385-7565  
1-800-FYI-3366

National Drug Information and  
Treatment Referral Hotline  
1-800-662-HELP  
1-800-66-AYUDA (Español)  
TDD 1-800-228-0427

National Families in Action  
2296 Henderson Mill Road  
Suite 204  
Atlanta, GA 30345  
404-934-6364

Women for Sobriety  
P.O. Box 618  
Quakertown, PA 18951  
1-800-333-1606

National Association for Native American  
Children of Alcoholics (NANACOA)  
611 12th Avenue South, Suite 200  
Seattle, WA 98144  
206-324-9360  
1-800-322-5601

National Association for Children of  
Alcoholics  
11426 Rockville Pike, Suite 100  
Rockville, MD 20852  
301-468-0985